Occupational stress affecting productivity in UAM – what is it, how does it affect us and how can we decrease its incidence?

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Developing a coherent understanding of stress, and more particularly occupational stress is complicated by the difficulty of there simply being too much information.

Stress is big business. Psychologists build practices on it, alternative therapists advertise that they can cure it and consulting firms are funding their investment portfolios on it. Hardly a day goes by when it is not mentioned on TV, presented in the newspaper or dealt with in one of our magazines.

If you believe all that you hear, stress is caused by almost any activity that involves breathing, and can be managed by eating more red meat and oysters, becoming a vegetarian, exercising vigorously, exercising gently, drinking moderately, giving up drinking, having sex and practicing abstinence. Where to start then?

In their book, *You and Stress: A Guide to Successful Living*[1], Dr Bob Montgomery and Lynette Evans define stress as "the application of some force or pressure to something." In humans, the sources of force and pressure are referred to as stressors. Stressors can be generated externally, eg. assaults, insults, demands; and internally; from your own body e.g. illness, thirst, fatigue; from your thoughts e.g. your beliefs, expectations and self talk; and from your own behaviour e.g. avoidance and aggression. The stress response is determined by your perceptions, in particular your appraisal of the situation and its significance[2]. A stressful event is one where the individual perceives it to be both threatening and overwhelming. Events perceived to be threatening but able to be dealt with adequately will not be regarded as stressful[3].

However, not all stress is detrimental. Where the levels of stress are manageable, they act as a form of stimulus to keep us going and motivated to deal with a range of tasks and issues. This is referred to as eustress, or positive stress. When the level or duration of the stress ceases to be manageable, it creates quite the opposite effect and significantly limits our ability to be productive as it causes us to experience a range of unpleasant feelings and physical symptoms. We commonly refer to this as stress, but it is more appropriately described as dystress, meaning bad stress.[4]

Stress is a process[5]. It is the result of the interaction between those things that cause us stress (stressors) and our ability to deal with them. Negative stress can be seen as what happens when our coping skills are no match for the demands placed upon us. This can also be stated as an imbalance between the body's resources and the demands made upon it[6].

When confronted with stress our bodies respond. The physiological changes occurring as a result of increased stress include increased blood pressure, fatigue, stomach ulcers, digestive disorders, changes in weight, and headaches. At the emotional level some of the more common changes include increased tension, anxiety, depression, frustration, and feelings of emptiness. Some of the behavioral changes you can expect to see include, abuse of alcohol and other substances, relationship difficulties, sleep problems, workplace conflict, aggressive or passive behaviour, negative changes in eating behaviour, and absenteeism.[7] The National Institute of Stress & Health noted that those who experienced unresolved stressful situations experienced an increased risk of illness, injury and disease. It is believed that in an attempt to keep the body in a constant state of activation in preparation to deal with 'the threat' there was significant risk of damage to our biological systems.[8]

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Employment involves a match between the job and the person filling it. The likelihood of experiencing work stress is greater when there is not a good match between the individual's skills and ability and the job demands and requirements, or when the work does not satisfy the individual's psychological and social needs. In short, the poorer the match the greater the risk of experiencing significant degrees of stress.[9]

It is commonly accepted that both the person and the job bring their own characteristics and vulnerabilities which contribute to the stress process. Many people come in to employment with pre-existing psychological difficulties or psychiatric conditions. It is neither possible nor reasonable to screen them out, but their presence in the workforce will, at least statistically, skew information about the incidence of occupational stress.[10]

Difficulties in family relationships and finance can be major sources of stress. Where this general life stress is being experienced concurrently with workplace issues it will effect the individual's perception of their workplace situation and the degree to which they experience 'workplace stress.'

Attempts have been made over the years to measure the amount of stress associated with particular events. While this is an inexact science, it is interesting to note that where it has been attempted, the highest rated events for stress are not work related. The "Holmes-Rahe Survey of Recent Experiences" is an example of this. (Bear in mind that the scale was created in 1967 and that the figure for mortgage amount would be substantially higher now).

[1] Montgomery, B., and L. Evans. You & Stress.1985. p. 9
[2] Cedar Court, HEALTHSOUTH Rehabilitation Hospital, 2003
[3] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002.
[4] Montgomery, B., and L. Evans. You & Stress.1985.
[5] Montgomery, B., and L. Evans. You & Stress.1985. p. 13
[6] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 6. (Selye, 1976)
[7] NT Work Health Authority and the Office for the Commissioner for Public Employment. 'Managing stress in the workplace - a practical guide for managers'. p. 6
[8] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 13. (National Institute of Stress and Health – NISH, 1999.)
[9] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 16. (Blau, 1981. Lofquist & Dawis, 1969.)
[10] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 15. (Kenny, 2000. Netmeyer, 2000.)
[11] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 30. (Sarantakos, 1996. Lasky, 1995. Russo & Vitaliano, 1995. Terry, 1991.)

THE HOLMES-RAHE SCALE

**Holmes & Rahe (1967). Holmes-Rahe life changes scale.
Journal of Psychosomatic Research, Vol. 11, pp. 213-218.**

Life Events	Life Crisis Units	Life Events	Life Crisis Units
Death of spouse	100	Son or daughter leaving home	29
Divorce	73	Trouble with in-laws	29
Change in financial state	38	Change in sleeping habits	16
Death of close friend	37	Change in number of family get-togethers	15
Change in number of arguments with spouse	35	Vacation	13
Mortgage over $100,000	31	Christmas alone	12
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30	Minor violations of the law	11
Change in responsibilities at work	29		

The Age newspaper reported on 7 April, 2003, that research being done at the Western Sydney's School of Management into the use of workplace counselling services found that 'the top three reasons for seeing a counsellor were relationship problems, cited by one in five people (20%), emotional disturbances or general feelings of stress (15% of cases) and work/family balance (10%). Stress caused by bullying and conflict in the office constituted only 3% of cases.' As an interesting aside, the same study found that 55% of the users of counselling were men, and that a third of all people using the service were managers.[12]

'Employment is a reciprocal relationship - both at the practical level and at the psychological level (Jones, Flynn & Kelloway, 1995). At the practical level, employees simply exchange labour for remuneration – an exchange that is often governed by a physical employment contract. However, at the psychological level, employees offer commitment to an organization in return for perceived support from that employer. In the optimum employment relationship, this psychological contract will be flexible in response to changes in the employment context. Stress-related difficulties are most likely to occur when violations of the psychological contract are seen as deliberate. In this case, one party is perceived as having been able to keep the implicit commitment but not having done so, either due to self-serving actions or negligence. When a violation of contract is perceived to have occurred, individuals will interpret their situation and seek to understand the meaning of their loss. This subjective interpretation or appraisal of the situation forms the centre of most theories of work stress (eg. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).'[13]

When the psychological contract is perceived to have been violated, the relationship deteriorates rapidly, often resulting in feelings of betrayal and anger which then contribute to a spiralling effect on the stress levels of the worker.[14]

On the other hand, where the relationship between employer and employee actively encourages development of skills and knowledge, and opportunities for involvement in such things as work process and job design, there is an increase in productivity and job satisfaction.[15]

There has been a belief that occupational stress is strongly linked to workload, emotional demands of work and other job demands. However, it is now thought that where workers see themselves as having some control in the workplace, i.e. the ability to exert some influence over the environment so that it becomes more rewarding and less threatening[16] they are far less likely to experience negative stress even where these factors are present. Having a sense of control decreases the amount of stress experienced.

If we examine the responses by people in UAM to the occupational stress survey carried out, we find that over 69 percent of the stressors identified have to do with the relationship with the employer rather than the characteristics of the work undertaken. The following are typical of the comments from people in UAM. They include; 'lack of support', 'lack of training', 'overworked,' 'no communication", 'ambiguous guidelines', 'management not knowing animal management practices', 'lack of compassion', 'political intervention', 'inconsistency in things told by supervisor to staff' and 'fatigue and loss of …time spent with family due to hours worked due to staff shortages'. These sorts of comments appear frequently expressed in a range of ways. While there are a number of specific workplace stressors for people in UAM, such as abuse and threats from people, injuries from handling large and aggressive animals, and euthanasia of animals, what becomes apparent is that the causes of stress are the same or similar to those experienced by any group in the workforce.

If we examine workplace stress in the context of the psychological contract model the UAM comments make sense.

It is thought that as many as one in four workers have taken leave for stress, but only 4% had made workcare claims.[17] Even though the number of claims made are limited, there is a very high cost associated with returning these people to work.[18]

It was reported in *The Age* on 21 June, 2003 that 'research by the Australian Psychological Society had found that companies that focus on the wellbeing of their employees were more successful at managing workplace stress and stimulating productivity.' The same research which analysed studies of more than 100,000 Australian private and public sector employees, 'found that the underlying cause of stress-related compensation claims and sick leave was low morale and not particular operational dangers and pressures…' and that employees in positive workplaces with high morale were less likely to take time off for stress or other illness.[19]

[12] Nixon, S. 'More men than women seek workplace counselling'. The Age. 7 April, 2003.
[13] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 17
[14] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 17
[15] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 63 (Rousseau, 1995)
16. Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002.
[17] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 12
[18] Occupational Stress: Factors that Contribute to its Occurrence and Effective Management. Centre for Human Services, Griffith University. August, 2002. p. 10. (Kenny, 1998. Toohey, 1993)
[19] Robinson, P. 'Valued workers take less time off'. The Age. 21 June, 2003.

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In 'Best Employers to Work for In Australia' Study 2003 published in AFR BOSS magazine on 14 March 2003 the employee response indicates that the things likely to increase work commitment and performance are; clear direction, open and honest communication, an understanding of where their work fits into the overall goals of the organisation, genuine opportunities to develop skills and knowledge for personal and professional growth, clear feedback on performance and genuine reward and recognition for their efforts. It is interesting to note that where these things occur, the employee is much more likely to be genuinely engaged with a greater sense of well being, and as a result working in a more productive and profitable workplace.[20] It is not hard to draw the conclusion that with this increased sense of well being and satisfaction comes a significantly decreased risk of the work environment contributing to a person's level of stress.

It is not my intention here to provide information or advice about individual stress management. This information is freely available from any number of sources. It is my belief that while managing stress is important; it deals with the situation after the fact. What we need to aim for is an approach which decreases the incidence of stress. Management strategies have traditionally been focused on the individual experiencing stress. Whilst such strategies are of value, there is much greater potential in proactive strategies. These strategies focus on the workplace, workplace behaviour, assisting the individual to develop knowledge and skills which increase their sense of wellbeing and ability to identify and deal with their own stress and that of their peers. Workplaces which decrease the incidence of stress, balance the needs and demands of all involved. In UAM this would mean the needs of the AMO's, the community and Council. Like the 'Best Employers', these organisations will focus on outcomes, and in doing so will give increased responsibility to workers to participate in change management, work process and job design, and involvement in the development of future directions, and in communication and feedback.[21] 'Healthy organisations will manage change effectively by assisting employees to understand the need for change through clear communication, justification for decisions, a shared vision for the future and transparency in the decision making process (Baruch & Hind, 1999). This type of communication will allow workers the opportunity to revise and reshape the psychological contract they have created with their employer.'[22]

SUMMARY

Stress is a fact of life and is an inherent part of all facets of our lives. Because the causes and experience of stress is highly subjective it is almost impossible to know or measure how all the different components contributing to it interact, and how much or little weight should be given to them. Given this, I am not sure that it is particularly useful to use the term 'workplace stress/ occupational stress'. If we are going to deal with stress effectively in the workplace it is perhaps more useful to think of it in terms of 'work exacerbated stress' or 'work impact stress.'

This acknowledges that negative stress, regardless of its cause impacts on the person and their work.

To address stress in a proactive manner requires that we create work environments which develop and support the 'whole person.' This recognises that stress in the workplace cannot be separated from stress associated with other life issues.

We all have the capacity to influence behaviour simply by modelling the sort of behaviour we believe should be promoted. Leadership and the ability to influence cultural change can be found at many levels in organisations. All too often we take the position that unless we are in senior management we cannot make an impact on the culture of an organisation or the way that people behave in it.

Most people in the workplace at one time or another will report to someone and will also have people report to them. If we are to influence the work environment and support those around us, we need to:-

- be available but not intrusive,
- listen and not judge,
- move from problem identification to seeking solutions,
- focus on outcomes for both the individual and the organisation,
- give honest feedback aimed to inform rather than cause hurt.

We need to work towards creating organisational cultures which engage their people and give them the opportunity to contribute to improvement of work process, job design and decision making, and support them to develop and use a broad range of skills and knowledge.

It is clear that organisations which can do these things have healthier people, fewer workcare claims, and people who regularly perform better.

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